DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 418 379 CS 013 150

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TITLE Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading.
PUB DATE 1998-04-02
NOTE 24p.; Exit Project, EDSE 695, California State University, Long Beach.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS High Schools; *Literacy; Reading Comprehension; *Reading Habits; *Reading Programs; Reading Research; Silent Reading; Student Attitudes; Student Surveys; *Sustained Silent Reading; Teacher Researchers
IDENTIFIERS Estancia High School CA

ABSTRACT

A study investigated the effect Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) has had on literacy at Estancia High School in California which recently implemented an SSR program. It also examined the role SSR has on language development, comprehension, vocabulary, student attitudes, and its corollary consequence on the development of reading habits. A survey of 22 students taught by the researcher and currently participating in the high school program supported both the positive and negative conclusions formed about SSR--19 of the students said they read most or all of the time during the established reading period. In a further survey at the school, 54 out of 90 students said they read most of the time when told to read silently for 20 minutes during class. Similar results were seen with respect to reading habits. Most students felt they read a little more since the SSR program was introduced; however, only 53% of the students surveyed want the school to continue the program. It is recommended that the SSR program be continued, since SSR gives students practice at reading and in experiencing different writing styles, which can help develop writing skills. The program provides skills that are critical in developing educated, college-bound students. (Contains a list of 14 recommendations and a 37-item bibliography.) (NKA)

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ED 418 379

Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading

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INTRODUCTION

The bell rings, the instructor does not say a word, all twenty-eight students pull out a book and they begin to read. The books vary in topics from A Patch of Gray to Chicken Soup for the Soul. The classroom is silent except for the ticking of the clock as my tenth-grade world history class reads for twenty-four minutes to start their class. This is how my second period class starts every day. Throughout the building students, teachers , janitors and administrators start to read during this time.The official name for this is Uninterrupted Silent Sustained Reading (SSR). SSR was originally proposed by Lyman Hunt at the University of Vermont in the 1960's and was implemented in public schools in the 1970's. First known as Uninterrupted Silent Sustained Reading or U.S.S.R., the "U" was later dropped in this acronym due to a mistaken association with the Soviet Union. SSR is also referred to as High Intensity Practice (HIP), Motivation in Middle School (MIMS), Free Voluntary Reading (FVR), Drop Everything and Read (DEAR), and Daily Independent Reading Time (DIRT).

Briefly described , SSR is a structured activity in which students are given a fixed period of time for the silent reading of self-selected material. This takes place in an environment which is free of interruptions. As the program continues, the time period for reading is gradually increased. The students are not held accountable for the material they choose to read. The teacher is also required to participate in the reading activity.

Advocates for SSR originally believed that the best way to develop students' reading skills was to give them as much opportunity as possible to read silently in class. It was felt that this would allow the students to develop into independent or self-

directed readers. Research on in-school reading dates back to the 1930's. After two years, reform school boys subjected to a program known as Hooked on Books scored better than their non-subjected peers on tests of reading comprehension, writing skills, attitude toward school, and self-esteem (Neuman, 1995). SSR, similar to Hooked on Books , is another silent, in-school reading tool which is being tested and used in the classroom.

This is a new program that was implemented this fall at my school (Estancia High School). I was very skeptical about this new program. I felt that I would spend twenty-four minutes acting as the reading police. To my amazement, ninety-nine percent of my students read for the full time without having to be continually supervised. Many of the students will get their SSR books out and read if they finish an assignment early. Some continue to read during the morning announcements which signals the end of SSR. I have been quite impressed with the program, therefore I wanted to research the true benefits of it. This paper will explore the SSR program, the benefits it has on students, and the negative effects it may possibly impose.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study is to investigate the effect Sustained Silent Reading has on literacy. It will also examine the role SSR has on language development, comprehension, vocabulary, student attitudes and corollary consequence on the development of reading habits. The study will scrutinize the various programs used.

Definition of terms

To Facilitate the interpretation of data in the study, the following definitions of terms and phrases have been defined.

1. Acquire: To come to have as a new or added characteristic, trait or ability as by sustained effort.

2. Attitude: The predisposition or tendency to react specifically towards an object, situitation or value; usually accompanied by feelings or emotions.

3. Basal Reading Materials: Textbook, charts, cards, workbooks, manuals, seatwork material.

4. Comprehension: The act of understanding the meaning of print or spoken language as contrasted with the ability to perceive and pronounce words without reference to their meaning.

5. Disruptions: To interrupt the normal corse of unity, to throw into disorder.

6. Holistic: Relating to or concerned with wholes or with complete systems rather than dissection into parts.

7. Literacy: Strictly, the bare ability to read and write : (2) more broadly, ability to read and write at the level of the average.

8. Nadsat: Words from slang.

9. Pleasure: Frivolous amusement source of delight -joy.

10. Teaching Direct: An organization of instruction specifying definite items or skills to be taught at stated times and by systematic method.

11. Vocabulary: The content and function words of a language which are learned so thoroughly that they became a part of the child's understanding, speaking, and later, reading and writing vocabulary.

History of the Topic

Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading (USSR) is an accepted component of many school reading programs. It was originally proposed by Lyman Hunt at the University of Vermont in the 1960's, and was implemented in the public schools in the 1970's in an effort to develop students who can not only read, but will read. In another program, Robert McCraken at Western Washington State College shortened this acronym to SSR , probably due to Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading (USSR) association with the Soviet Union. In reality SSR has existed for as long as people have been reading. When a person selects something to read for his/her own purpose, spends more than a few moments pursuing it, and comprehends what they have taken in, SSR is occurring.

At one time, there was considerable support for the notion that free reading is harmful. In a article titled "The Evil of Unlimited Freedom in the Use of Juvenile Fiction," a nineteeth-century librarian named Bean claimed that the "craze for books among schoolchildren leads to inattention, want of application, distaste for study, as well as utter neglect of home as well as school duties. " (Neuman,1995). One hundred years later, Wertham in 1954 maintained that comic book reading, because of the pictures, was hurting reading development and that the lurid stories were leading children into lives of crime and other forms of antisocial behavior. Research on comic book reading does not support these conclusions. On the contrary, research done on comic book texts and on the impact of comic book reading on language development and school performance suggests that comic books lead to more "serious" reading and they are not harmful.Comics , first of all , contain a substantial amount of reading

volume. R.L. Thorndike (1941) found that popular comic books contain about 10,000 words . One comic a week would mean about 100,000 words per year , about 10 percent of the average yearly reading volume of middle-class children (Krashen 1993). Some teachers today feel that allowing children to choose their own books would be as foolish as allowing children to choose their own food. In fact, earlier free reading studies show that extensive readings of self-selected materials over long periods of time result in positive gains, particulaty in attitudes and interest.

LaBrant 's (1936) study of fifty-seven students in individualized free reading programs through tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades showed significant increases in reading maturity. In a follow-up study twenty-five years later on the same subjects, it was found that, as adults, these people were still motivated and active readers. Heller's (1940) study of junior high students for three years in an individualized reading program where self-selection was employed showed that by the third year students were reading more and had more mature reading attitudes. Heise (1931) in a thirty minute per day free reading program that replaced formal instruction in grades four to eight, pre- and post- tested students and found and average eighteen month gain in reading achievement in eighteen months. More recent studies (Fader and McNeil 1968) have also cited improvement from longer term extensive reading programs.

Major Issues, Controversies, Program and Contributors

In-school free reading programs provide some of the clearest evidence for the power of reading. There are two kinds of free in-school free reading programs: sustained silent reading and self-selected reading. Some SSR advocates differ slightly in their recommendation of specific rules, but most agree on the following

guidelines:

1. During SSR time there are no interruptions.
2. Teachers model good reading behavior by reading themselves.
3. Students should be free to choose their own reading material, including comic books.
4. SSR takes place at the same time each day, promoting consistency of the activity.
5. As the program continues, the time period is increased.
6. A wide selection of materials should be available in the classroom.

Research emphasizes that the teacher must participate as a reader in order for an SSR program to be successful. The importance of the modeling behavior by the teacher cannot be over stressed. Dieie Lee Spiegal (1981) believes that the most important factor in a recreational reading program is the teacher's belief in the value of the program, which can only be demonstrated by being a reading model. The teacher's overwhelming faith in the inherent value of reading is essential because, " ... you can't sell something you don't believe in yourself " (Wiscont 1990). McCraken and McCraken (1978) claimed that one of the major causes for the failure of SSR was the lack of involvment by teachers during the reading activity. Teachers show a lack of commitment when they do administrative chores, mark test, or do other non-reading tasks.

The most critical step is to provide students with access to interesting books and other reading material. The old saying applies that, " you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink ." The water must be provided, and in many cases, Kool-Aid may be more appropriate. Research supports the widely accepted view that when books are readily available, and when the print environment is rich, more reading is done (Krashen 1993).

The case for including independent reading time in the school is well established. Yet, according to the information presented in Becoming a Nation of Readers, 15 percent of the nation's schools do not have libraries. In most of the remaining schools the collections are quite insignificant, averaging just over 13 volumes per student (Coy-Shaffer 1989). California ranks last in the country in the quality of its public libraries, and ranks near the bottom in school libraries (Krashen 1998). Access to public libraries also affects how much children read. Heyns (1978) reported that children who live closer to public libraries read more. There is some disparity between public libraries. Less privileged children have significantly less access to books.

A vital first step in implementing Sustained Silent Reading therefore is the collection of a variety of reading materials both within the schools as well as the communities. In some cases parents, teachers, and members of the communities have been asked to donate reading materials, but this is not an option even slightly considered in many areas. Although numerous teachers have collected books for their libraries through book clubs and by purchasing books with their own funds at garage sales and book sales, some teachers are not able to provide an entire classroom with materials for independent reading. Classroom teachers should not maintain the responsibility of providing independent reading materials for classroom use from personal funds. Administrators must be made aware of the fact that a print rich environment is not a luxury but a necessity. Miller and Shontz (1991) found that, in general, school library media centers are spending more for technology than for books and magazines. The funding used to purchase one computer could make a significant difference with respect to the addition of literature in a school library.

SSR can be easily implemented by parents in their homes. The new version of this program, Home Sustained Silent Reading (HSSR), can be used to promote a love

for reading that involves parents and extends into the home to provide additional support for children as well as a common goal for home and school. A number of reasons can be cited for concentrating on this type of program. First, because many students do not tend to read outside of the school setting, HSSR is viewed as an effective program for extending reading opportunities. Parents must encourage a fixed period of time for the silent reading that will occur, possibly twenty minutes before night time television or immediately after homework is completed. HSSR may also encourage children to spend less time watching television. As the program progresses parents should extend the time period for reading as is done in the classroom. It is possible that the children may actually be extending the reading period voluntarily, without parental persuasion.

There are two programs that are designed to reinforce the SSR program. One that is gaining much acceptance involves the use of reading sheets or reading logs. A reading log requires three basic pieces of information from the student which include the number of pages read, the date the material was read, and a three line summary of that particular reading (Dyson 1991).

Another program used to reinforce SSR is Sustained Silent Reading and Writing. Each day the students read silently as was previously described by the SSR program. Upon completion of the silent reading period, they write in a notebook for five minutes about what they have read. This simple task accomplishes several things. Students must stop and reflect on what they have read. They consider what the day's passage was about, they visualize key events, and then they put them in logical sequence. This activity developes comprehension and recall skills. Students are also encouraged to make evaluative comments on what they are reading. If the student comments that they cannot understand what is going on or that the book is boring, this may indicate that the book is not holding the student's interest or that the book might

be too difficult. If a teacher reads these comments they might recommend that the student choose another book or give some suggestions based on more content students' comments (Pyle1990).

Sustained Silent Reading is not without its problems. There are, of course, students who may not always cooperate. Disinterested, disruptive students cannot be forced to read. Research has shown that discipline is an observable problem during designated reading periods. Such students appear restless and easily distracted. Disruptions were measured during five minute periods and were counted as any activity that disturbed the silence of the reading activity or caused the teacher to respond. The average number of disturbances for a five minute period was six (Dully 1989).

Synthesis and Analysis

Research conducted to determine the effects of SSR has produced mixed results. In a six week study using secondary Upward Bound students, Burley (1980) found that SSR had a more positive effect on reading comprehension than three other practice methods (Manning-Dowd 1985). According to Janice Pilgreen, 1993 Students showed remarkable gains on the Stanford Reading Comprehension Test, gaining an average of fifteen months in sixteen weeks, averaging nearly one month gain for every week in the program (PILGREEN KRASHEN 1993). Keffort (1981) found that seventh grade boys in an all boys school had a four percent increase in reading comprehension and a seven percent increase in vocabulary usage as a result of their participation in SSR for a six month period (Manning -Dowd 1985).

Stephen Krashen summarized the impact of in-school free reading programs on standardized tests of reading comprehension. "Student readers were compared to

students participating in traditional language arts programs, programs that emphasized reading from the assigned basal reader and direct instruction in grammar, vocabulary, reading comprehension, and spelling." The results indicated that 38 out of 41, or 93 percent of the students who participated in in-school free reading programs did as well or better than those students who were engaged in traditional arts programs.

Some studies that were conducted over a longer duration have shown positive results more consistantly. Sandra Holts' researched a group of seventh grade, predominantly black students in a south-western school district and found that SSR produced positive results. She observed students involved in a 10 week program of Sustained Silent Reading (twenty minutes, three times a week) and Sustained Silent Writing (twenty minutes, two times a week). There was a significant difference between those who received this program as part of the language arts block of instruction and those who used the basal reading series only (Holt 1988).

Some research has shown that there is no significant difference in reading comprehension among students involved in the SSR program compared to those who have only been subjected to more traditional arts programs. Summers (1982) found that a group of 5th, 6th, and 7th grade students who were exposed to a five month SSR program showed no significant improvement with respect to reading achievement test scores. Similarly, a long-term six year study of junior high students revealed no difference in reading achievements.

According to Irene Everett, the effect of SSR on reading comprehension scores produced mixed results. She tested a group of eighth grade inner-city students and found that fifteen minutes of recreational reading positively effected their reading comprehension scores as measured by the Burns/Roe Reading Inventory test. though the difference between the experimental and control group between means was not

significant.(Everette1987).

The research conducted on the effect of SSR on reading attitudes of students has also produced varied results. The results of twelve studies indicate that SSR does indeed have a positive effect on attitude towards reading as measured on an attitude survey (Wiscont 1990). Carol Combs conducted a study of Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading at the Ursa Major Elementary School in Ancourage, Alaska where USSR is in its second year of implementation. One hundred thirty six boys and girls in grades three through six completed two questionnaire surveys on their attitudes towards SSR. When asked what they do during USSR period, 84.4% said they read most or all the time. 70.1% of the students surveyed said they definetely read more because of SSR. The impact SSR has had on student attitudes toward reading is most greatly revealed by the fact that 87.4% of the students wanted SSR to continue. Over 90% of the students and teachers have seen changes in the reading habits at the school since SSR has been in practice.

I have observed similar results at my school (Estancia High School, Costa Mesa, Ca). My observations of my class, along with the result of Combs study in which 58% of all students polled claim to read at school when they complete assignments or have free time have led me to research SSR.

Katherine Wiesendanger studied the effect of a sustained silent reading program on recreational reading habits after the termination of the program. In general, she found that SSR students read more than those who do not participate in the program. She particularly found that while SSR had no impact on the above average readers, it had a tremendous impact on the average readers, and little or no impact on the below average reader (1989). The average readers in this program averaged 110 minutes of recreational reading per week in the summer compared to only 70 minutes for those students who had not been involved in SSR . This indicates

that teachers have the ability to substantially increase the interest and amount of reading done by a significant portion of their students.

Some studies on students' attitudes towards reading after they participated in the SSR program have shown less than positive results. Harvey and Summers (1979) reported that they found no effect on attitude towards reading. Einhorn (1979) saw no significant difference in the attitude or the amount of independent reading done by students after the SSR program as well. These were cited in Carol Comb's article "Student and Teacher Attitudes Towards Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading". Three studies cited by (Wiscont 1990) found that there was no relationship between SSR and student attitudes towards reading.

Several studies also indicate that the SSR program may cause participants to develop negative attitudes toward reading. Milton (1980) found that students involved in the SSR program showed a less favorable attitude toward reading than they had prior to the implementation of the program. A second study whose findings showed that SSR had a negative effect on reading attitude was conducted by Mikulecky& Wolf (1977). Herbert (1987) examined the attitudes toward SSR among 600 junior high students and found that students generally had a negative attitude towards it. Further, this researcher reported that students who indicated they liked to read and also thought of themselves as good readers claimed that they did not like the SSR program. Herbert also reported that approximately half the of the subjects said that they did not actually participate in SSR during the allotted time period, but did other things including visiting with friends.

Due to this report, it is evident that many factors must be considered and measured when such studies are being conducted. Each study giving negative results of the SSR program needs to consider the behavior of the students being observed, the average amount of distractions during the reading periods, and the reading

material available to the students. Lack of or loss of interest may be directly related to these critical factors.

The research has shown that most experts agree with the positive effects SSR has on vocabulary gains among student. The Clockwork Orange study provided a powerful demonstration of our ability to acquire vocabulary by reading. In this study, adult readers were asked to read A Clockwork Orange by Anthony Burgess, a novel that contains 241 words from slang called nadsat. Each nadsat word is repeated an average of 15 times. During this study, the subjects were asked to read the book and were told they were given a test of comprehension and literacy criticism. They were not told to try to learn the nadsat words. After reading the book they were given a multiple choice test covering the 90 nadsat words. A great deal of vocabulary acquisition occurred. " Scores ranged from 50 percent to 96 percent correct, with an average of 76 percent- subjects picked up at least 45 words, simply by reading a novel" (Krashen 1993).

While conducting an unrelated study with respect to vocabulary gains of subjects during SSR, Nagy, Herman, and Anderson unintentionally demonstrated that gains in vocabulary occur through 'natural reading'. A further conclusion follows : because Sustained Silent Reading involves substantial amounts of natural reading, it is probable that this practice fosters vocabulary growth. They stated that students should have direct instruction in vocabulary, but the number of words that students need to learn is too enormous to rely on word to word instruction. Thus students must somehow become independent word learners. Attempts to design direct vocabulary instruction leading students to independently learn non-instructed words have failed to date. On the other hand, the results discussed above "strongly suggest that an effective way to produce large scale vocabulary growth is through an activity that is all

too often interrupted in the process of reading instruction: Reading" (Manning-Dowd 1985).

Research strongly implies that we also learn to write by reading. To be more precise, we acquire writing style, the special language of writing, by reading (Krashen 1993). The ways in which formal written language differs from more informal language are too complex to be learned at one time. Even though readers can recognize good writing, researchers have not succeeded in completely describing just what it is that makes good writing good. It is, therefore, sensible to suppose that writing style is not consciously learned, but is largely absorbed from reading (Krahen 1993).

Applebee, Langer, and Mullis (1986) asked students how many essays and reports they had written over a six week period. Only 18.6 percent of fourth graders and 7.8 percent of eleventh graders wrote more than 10. Because students write so infrequently, it may be assumed that they actually learn the majority of their writing skills and styles by reading.

There have been studies which hypothesize that students who read widely can improve their spelling without direct instruction. Each time readers read a passage containing words they cannot spell, they make a small amount of progress in acquiring the correct spelling (Newport-Mesa Unified School District 1998). Krahen cited Nisbets' study(1941) which tested a group of children ages 11 to 14 who read passages containing words they could not spell correctly on a pretest. After reading the passage, they could spell an average of about one out of twenty five of these words. This study indicates that the findings of spelling growth due to SSR is not particularly impressive. Yet if students read 22 minutes per day, they will read an average of 1,823,000 words per year. By reading twenty minutes per day, students can read 1,000 to 4,000 new words a year. Thus, one out of 25 may be significant if the reader reads substantially.

Nearly all research on SSR has used native English speakers as subjects, but there have also been studies that show a positive result of SSR programs on second language learners. A study by Janice Pilgren showed that second language students showed gains in reading comprehension, and reported greater frequency and enjoyment of reading through the involvement in SSR. Over 56% of the second language students enjoyed the SSR program "very much". It was reported that 62% of the students felt they improved a great deal in their reading comprehension. The students showed remarkable gains on the Stanford Diagnostic comprehension test, gaining an average of fifteen months during the sixteen week program and averaging nearly a month for every week in the program (Pilgreen,Krashen 1993). When second language acquirers read for pleasure, they develop the competence they need to move from the beginning conservational level to a level where they can use the second language for more demanding purposes, such as the serious study of literature,business, and so on. When they read for pleasure, they can continue to improve in their second language without classes, without teachers, without study, and even without people to converse with.

Conclusions

Some argue that reading is the most taught, but under-practiced skill in schools today. Much time is spent teaching students how to read, but often few opportunities are afforded them to practice (Moore, Jones and Miller 1980). Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) is a school activity which consists of a period of time during the school day when students, teachers, and the support staff of an entire school read self-selected books without interruption for the purpose of enjoyment. The program may

also be practiced and developed in the home through parental encouragement and participation. If the student enjoys reading, he or she may develop attitudes and habits conducive to a lifetime of reading for pleasure and learning purposes.

The research conducted to determine the effect of SSR has produced mixed results. The majority of the studies seem to show that SSR has a positive effect on students' reading comprehension, writing style, vocabulary, attitude towards reading, and spelling. SSR has also been found to develop literacy in second language students.

In conducting a survey similar to the studies discussed in this paper, I observed results that support both the positive and negative conclusions formed about SSR. In the class where I conduct the SSR program, 19 out of 22 students said they read most or all of the time during the established reading period. In a survey of students who I teach, but do not conduct the SSR program, 54 out of 90 students said they read most of the time when told to read silently for twenty minutes during class. Similar results were seen with respect to reading habits. My SSR class stated that 18 out of 22 of them felt they read a little more or a lot more since we have started the program. My other classes also had positive results with 63 out of 90 students stating they read a little more or a lot more since the SSR program has been introduced.

Though positive results have been observed, the students are less enthusiastic about continuing our SSR program. Only 53% of the students surveyed want our school to continue with it.

I am a firm believer that it takes practice to become good at a skill such as reading. SSR gives students practice at reading. Simultaneously, they experience different writing styles which can develope their writing skills, they experience new words which will expand their vocabulary and they increase their ability to spell correctly. While SSR may be an unenjoyable experience for some students, the

program provides skills that are critical in developing educated, college-bound students. Therefore I believe schools should incorporate a SSR program into their curriculum.

Recommendations

The research I have done, along with my experience with SSR at Estancia High School lead me to the following conclusions concerning this type of program:

1. Schools should provide a wide variety of materials from which students can choose.
2. Provide a way to circulate books.
3. Build your schools supply of SSR books through garage sales, donations, from famalies whose teenagers have grown, and through other creative means.
4. Schools should make applications to Reading is Fundemental (RIF). RIF partner are eligible for discounts on trade books ordered directly from the publishers
5. Schools should write grants to obtain books.
6. Schools should salicit community involvement for Book Donations through local media.
7. Schools should inform the parents about the program so they can encourage their children and practice this program at home (HSSR). This will also discourage parents from interrupting a class during the SSR time for non-emergency appointments and alike because they will understand its importance.

8. Parents should read to the younger students and parents of older students should show interest in the book their student is reading.
9. The Principal and Administrators should visit classrooms weekly to demonstate the importance of SSR.
10. For less capable readers, books on tape could be used with a copy of the book. Books and magazines of every reading level should be available.
11. The SSR time should gradually be increased but should not go longer than 20 minutes. Personally, I cannot sit still for a period longer than twenty minutes and neither can the majority of my students.
12. A reading log is vital for student accountability. This deviates from one of standard principals of SSR, but I feel that it is needed.
13. Once a week spend 5 minutes sharing what is being read during SSR.
14. Teachers need to be good role models

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